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Hermanas de Corazón y Alma

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Hermanas de Corazón y Alma

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Friendship is a relationship that can traverse generations or be located within a specific era of a person's life. In this article, the author examines the role that her childhood friendship played in shaping her understanding of gender, ethnicity, poverty, immigration, spirituality and family processes. This friendship was during emerging adolescence and helped the author navigate and develop mestiza consciousness. These lessons were reinforced during her graduate training and have influenced her identity as a Chicana feminist therapist and the manner in which she connects with clients in psychotherapy. After presenting the story of her friendship, the author incorporates the theoretical perspectives of Chicana Feminism and Spiritita to demonstrate how this friendship has influenced her clinical work with women. Specific themes discussed are language, invisibility, and cultural formulations of gender and spirituality.

KEYWORDS *Chicana, Chicana feminism, feminist, friendship, Spiritita*

INTRODUCTION

"A bosom friend—an intimate friend, you know—a really kindred spirit to whom I can confide my inmost soul. I've dreamed of meeting her all my life."

The bosom friend described by the orphaned Anne in the children's book *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1908, p. 64) resonated with my dream to have a confidant to share my deepest secrets. Carmen Lopez was just that

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for me—the kindred spirit I am so grateful I met at the age of 12. Our friendship has waxed and waned since our adolescence in the early 1980s until now, but a common thread throughout it all is the love and soulful bond described so eloquently by Anne. Through this complex relationship, I have learned first-hand about authenticity, spirituality, and the many roads to ethnic and gender identity within the context of poverty and family processes. Not only have these lessons influenced my growth as a woman and friend, but also my clinical work as a Chicana feminist therapist. I will present our friendship story and application to my clinical work within the theoretical lenses of *Spirita*, “... a womanist and *mujerista* spirituality” (Comas-Díaz, 2008, p. 13), and Chicana feminism, which “... is a move away from silence, giving voice to our experience” (Córdova, 1998, p. 38).

NUESTRO ENCUENTRO

At the age of 12, my parents decided to transfer me from a religious private school to a public school in the suburbs of Los Angeles, California. Unfortunately the day of this transfer was in the middle of the school year, and the first day at my new public school was on Valentine’s Day. I dreaded that first day, and my fears were realized when I observed the students exchanging gifts and cards. During my last class of the day, Carmen Lopez introduced herself and shared one of her Valentine lollipops with me. She had long black hair, a soft voice not unlike my own, and a sweet smile. I later learned that this smile was reserved only for the most deserving, for she was skilled at reading her surroundings and determining the authenticity of people she met. This sense of intuition was a survival skill that was refined throughout her life, and was necessary in our small town that had few Latino families.

Carmen was my first “best friend.” I was extremely shy as a pre-teen; consequently making new friends was not easy for me. I preferred to read my books and play sports, but the thought of initiating friendships was terrifying. We both enjoyed reading, listening to typical teen music, and excelling in our classes. We even created a secret diary that contained our favorite poems, lyrics from songs we loved, and dreams for our future. We could be real with each other, and within the space of unconditional love, we were able to share our deepest fears, pain, and joy.

FAMILIA (FAMILY)

Although we were kindred spirits, our families were profoundly different and this friendship offered me my first glimpse into the powerful role family processes play in individuals’ lives. To teachers and friends unfamiliar with

Latino culture, we seemed to come from similar backgrounds as Mexican Americans. On the contrary, we came from very different worlds. We experienced *mestiza consciousness* (Anzaldúa, 1987) in different ways. Anzaldúa (1987) describes this consciousness as living in the Borderlands of multiple cultures, with the ability of the *mestiza* to "... sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else" (p. 101).

Carmen's parents were born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States to work and raise their family, whereas I came from a bi-ethnic and bi-cultural family with a long history in California and Arizona. While I had numerous relatives in the surrounding area, Carmen's extended family remained in Mexico. She spoke Spanish daily with her parents, whereas my exposure to Spanish was reserved for visits with my grandparents and relatives. Even within these differences we found connections. We both shared a love of *familia*, but the expression of our dedication looked very different. Her dedication was expressed daily in very culturally defined gender roles. Not only was she expected to help her mother with household work, but she also was expected to act as her mother's culture and language broker (see Morales & Hanson, 2005; Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003) when her father was at work. The role of language broker was very time consuming and began the moment she returned from school. I often accompanied Carmen and Mrs. Lopez on less-intrusive excursions to the supermarket and post office; but I was not invited when Carmen assisted her mother at doctor appointments or visits to the welfare or immigration office. Privacy was superseded by the needs of the family within the Lopez household. As language broker, Carmen was present when her mother learned of very personal information, such as a tumor that was feared to be cancerous. Carmen was not permitted the luxury of her emotional reaction, for she had to focus on the task at hand. She had to access the correct vocabulary to interpret the information from English to Spanish, and she had to be sure to ask her mother's questions as well as her own. Because she felt like she had to be strong for her parents, the fear and sadness were only expressed in our diary.

Carmen asked me to keep our secret diary at my house because she was afraid to take it home. She feared her parents would take it away and not allow her to have these secrets. I quickly learned that Carmen's parents were stricter than my own, and she did not enjoy the freedoms that I enjoyed. She often complained that her parents would not allow her to participate in extracurricular activities. She explained to me that her parents had the dream that she would get a scholarship to college and become a doctor. Our parents were not dissimilar in this respect, but my parents also valued the social experiences of high school.

The Lopez' style of parenting can be understood within more recent advances in the psychological literature about parenting. The parenting literature is shaped by the influential works of Baumrind (1966) and Maccoby and Martin (1983) and their development of the authoritarian, authoritative,

neglectful, and permissive parenting styles. Empirical research generally supports these labels, yet few studies examined their applicability in Latino families. In a critical study with 50 first-generation Latino parents and their children, Domenech Rodríguez, Donovan, and Crowley (2009) included observational methods to understand parenting styles. These researchers included Baumrind's (1966) dimension of autonomy granting, which was typically not included parenting research. Results indicated that 61% of Latino parents could be categorized as "Protective." Specifically, they were characterized as high on warmth and demandingness, but low on autonomy granting. In addition, parents were lower on autonomy granting with their daughters compared with their sons. These data are descriptive of Carmen's parents and their style of parenting. They were very warm and loving, yet they were very strict about monitoring her activities outside of school. Clearly they held traditional values of *marianismo*, emulating the Virgin Mary and sacrificing for the family (Niemann, 2004). Brenda often complained about the inequities between her and her younger brothers. Her brothers were allowed much more latitude in both their physical movement between their home and the outside world, and the same freedom was applied to their emotional expression. Whereas Carmen was expected to be even-tempered, her brothers were permitted to be loud in laughter and in anger.

Interpreting the parental protection of Carmen only using a gendered lens would miss a very important dimension of their experience as undocumented immigrants. They trusted Carmen and believed she would make good choices, but that was irrelevant because they did not trust the world they lived in. After high school, Carmen shared with me that she was taught to disclose little about their family to "outsiders," or it might put the family in jeopardy of being deported. Another concern was that outside the boundaries of their family, the fear of attracting violence was a daily reality. They lived in a one-bedroom apartment in a neighborhood that was known for gang activity. Because of this, my parents forbade me to spend time with Carmen outside of school unless it was at my house in a "safe" neighborhood.

Ironically, when we were 13, we learned that a young woman was raped at a house two blocks from my home. My parents would not disclose the details, but I had to walk past this house daily on my way to and from school. Until this point in my life, my awareness of sexual assault and rape was nonexistent. In fact, my knowledge of sex was limited to pieces of information from television, music, and conversations with friends that were accompanied by embarrassed giggles. Both Carmen and I felt the impact of this assault on a visceral level. When we approached the house, we crossed the street, and our conversation ceased. In unison, we broke into a run until we reached the end of the block. Unconsciously we realized that just the fact that we were young girls put us at risk for harm, and we hadn't developed the tools (i.e., language) to make sense of this. No words were spoken, but the run empowered us.

POVERTY AND TRADITION

My parents worked outside the home, and my dad often worked two jobs at one time; we were considered a “working class” family. Carmen’s family, however, was barely making it day to day. Mr. Lopez worked in the field of building construction, but he always was the first employee let go when business slowed down. Consequently, he worked any job he could find and often earned minimum wage or less. Mrs. Lopez stayed home and cared for Carmen and her younger brothers, and it wasn’t until after high school that I learned that Mr. and Mrs. Lopez had a fifth grade reading level in Spanish, and struggled with learning to speak and write English. Their sense of connection with the community was through attendance at church functions through the Hispanic ministry. I went with their family to Sunday mass and always was in awe of the pride they had in their religious traditions. This was their connection to their culture and family in Mexico. Before every service, Carmen’s mother prayed at the large painting of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. I watched her bend on her knees and fervently pray. My adolescent mind could not grasp her dedication, but I knew and felt that I was in the presence of something very powerful. Even on her knees, I knew her strength and I saw the powerful calm that enveloped her during and after that prayer. Everyone knew that was her time, her time with the *Virgin*, but most importantly her time to be herself in connection with the divine. No one dared interrupt her.

The Lopez family always contributed to the weekly collection, and made this a priority. I was ashamed the first time I forgot my wallet at home and had no money to contribute. Even at the tender age of 13, I understood that I had privileges. At school, I knew Carmen was embarrassed that she received a free hot lunch. Even though I brought my lunch from home, I walked with her through the lunch line and chatted with her to distract her and anyone else nearby. I knew the look in Carmen’s eyes when issues of money arose. She lost the twinkle in her eye, and she acted like she didn’t care about whatever would cost her parents extra money. She was a great actress, but I knew my friend, and through her I learned about the shame of poverty.

IMPACT OF FRIENDSHIP ON PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH WOMEN

As an early-career professional, I look forward to my continued growth as a clinician. I have always been drawn to the inclusiveness and flexibility encouraged in feminist therapy. Brown (2010) explains,

Today, feminist therapy continues to be founded theoretically in a close and careful analysis of the meanings and contributions of gender and

other social locations such as culture, phenotype, social class, sexual orientation, and age, both to normative identity development and life trajectories as well as to the etiologies of distress and dysfunction. (p. 3)

Feminist therapy is congruent with the way I understand the world and the problems in it, and I use it as a framework for the integration of theories from critical psychology (Brown, 2010). Living in California, and previously in South Texas, the majority of my clients immigrated from Mexico or Central America, and received therapy in community mental health settings that offered a sliding-fee schedule. Their presenting problems often were depression or anxiety, and these concerns were exacerbated by struggles to find a Spanish-speaking therapist. An example of this systemic barrier to treatment includes agencies that have bilingual therapists but have no Spanish-speaking staff to answer phones. As a result, when clients need to contact their therapist, they must follow special rules such as only calling on a specific day, or calling after hours to leave a message in Spanish. Upon our first meeting, my clients are often very relieved to learn that not only am I Latina, but I understand Spanish.

Although the “presenting problems” tend to be intrapsychic/individual in nature, our work invariably turns to themes about language, voice, understanding, and invisibility. González (2001) shares her own awareness as a child that her grandmother did not speak English, “I could not fathom that *she did not speak English*. Even in my immature state, I could discern that a person who did not speak English was invisible. He or she did not exist. English was the currency of exchange for securing personhood” (p. 50).

Based on my experiences with Carmen and her mother, I have learned that this invisibility takes a toll on an individual. Speaking in my client’s first language, coupled with an authentic and respectful acceptance sets a powerful context for a woman who feels marginalized linguistically, ethnically, and sexually. For example, the simple comment “*No entiendo inglés* (I don’t understand English),” can easily be transformed to “*No entienden español* (They don’t understand Spanish).” This small transformation shifts agency for problems in communication and the identified source of deficiency in a way that gives clients a new perspective of their problem as external from themselves.

Much of the research about bilingual therapy and the shift to the dominant language to access deep emotions discuss the problems that may be encountered if the client “resists” by switching back to English (Aguirre, Bermúdez, Cardona, Zamora, & Reyes, 2005; Altarriba & Santiago-Rivera, 1994; Bond & Lai, 1986; Clauss, 1998). Rather than view this as “resistance,” I experience this as a method of coping and a sense of reclaiming their experience. As a clinician, this is a sign that we have moved too quickly. While it would seem that this would be empowering for the client, some bilingual clients avoid speaking in Spanish, because it is associated with feelings of

vulnerability. Language then becomes a variable in the therapeutic process of healing, and with a feminist perspective is modulated by the client.

For example, Isabel was a 40-year-old Mexican American woman who I worked with in individual counseling regarding a traumatic event in which she thought her 17-year-old son had died. She recalled that her son was changing the oil in his car in front of their house, while she was in the kitchen preparing dinner. She said she heard a loud crash from the front yard, and immediately knew something was wrong. She said she rushed to the front yard to see that a large truck had smashed into her son's car and it was demolished. All she could imagine was her son's body hidden within the folds of the crushed metal. She said she screamed and ran to the car looking for her son. She said she felt like she was outside herself and wondered who was screaming so loud. Later she realized it was her. She recounted that her husband ran out and grabbed her, but she was trying to pull away and look for her son. She recalled feeling so angry that her husband was not helping her but was instead fighting her. What seemed like hours were only minutes until she could hear her husband's voice. He was telling her that their son was not in the accident. He was explaining that their son used the family car to go to the store to buy materials for the oil change, and that he was safe. Isabel shared that even though her son was safe, she could not move on. She said she could barely get out of bed every day and that she felt "depressed." She also felt guilty because she had two younger children that still needed her, but she was struggling with day-to-day life. She added that her husband was concerned about her and urged her to seek therapy.

The first month of our work together was in English. We discussed language in the first session when I overheard her talk to her young child in Spanish. I offered that she could speak in Spanish in our sessions, but she quickly denied that as an option. As I got to know her better, I noticed an emotional shift when she spoke about the event. She seemed very detached and somewhat robotic. When we explored her network of support, she explained that she no longer felt safe driving, so her *Tía* (aunt) drives her everywhere. She added that they take daily walks together. When I asked about these walks, she shyly shared that they walk to the Catholic Church together to pray. She added that her *Tía* waits in the lobby while we are in session. I asked if she would like her *Tía* to join a session, and Isabel happily agreed. She shared that she would like for us to meet. During our meeting with *Tía Elia*, I was surprised to learn that she preferred to speak in Spanish. She immediately began talking about her love for Isabel and with tears in her eyes, shared that she hopes Isabel will become whole again. I asked her to explain what she means by this, and she said she felt that Isabel had experienced *susto* (fright), and that her soul had left her body and was lost. She said she had encouraged Isabel to go to a *curandera* (traditional female healer) for a *limpia* (cleansing), but that Isabel no longer believes in the "old" ways of healing. When I turned to Isabel, I was surprised to see

tears flowing down her face, and I asked her in Spanish what she was feeling. She replied in Spanish that she agreed that it felt like her soul was gone, but that she is not sure how to get it back. Much of our subsequent work was in Spanish and English and we used the metaphor of *llamando* (calling) her soul back and feeling whole. She shared that therapy, prayer, and the daily walks helped, and we often talked about the demands of her role as *madre y esposa*, (mother and wife). We often discussed the elder women in her life as guides for how she could feel empowered. Often this involved re-defining *mujer* (woman) as powerful. For example, Isabel felt validated by the reconceptualization of her fright not as a deficit, or that it was due to her weakness; but as a reflection of her innermost power, and that her soul needed to be protected. Also, with the help of her *Tía Elia*, she found a reputable curandera to conduct a *limpia* and help her along in her process of re-connection with her soul.

The concept of *Spirita* is an appropriate application to Isabel's experience, in that it allows for multiple influences of healing and power, and the integration of traditional religion and indigenous approaches (Comas-Diaz, 2008). Isabel shared that she appreciated that during the *limpia*, her *curandera* used traditional prayers to God. The *curandera* compared Isabel's love of her son to the love the *Virgin de Guadalupe* felt for her son. *La Virgin de Guadalupe* is considered the patron saint of the Americas, and as described by Comas-Diaz (2008, p. 18) is a "... syncretism of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin with the Christian Virgin Mary, Guadalupe constitutes a spiritual paradox (Castillo, 1996). Even though Guadalupe is a small, dark, and poor *mestiza*, she is a most powerful freedom fighter (Teish, 1996)." The smooth transitions from weakness and fright to powerful fighter became the final themes of Isabel's healing narrative; but congruent with *Spirita*, they were not accomplished alone, but in solidarity with her community of *mujeres* (women).

SELF-REFLECTION

Working from the perspectives of Chicana feminism and *Spirita* allow me to access my clients' framework for understanding the world, and acknowledge their strengths as they navigate their healing paths. Just as my friend Carmen was imbued with the gift of intuition about people and her surroundings, I am not surprised when women of color share such talents. Like Carmen, I was raised in a family that valued and feared the supernatural. Dreams provided the opportunity to communicate with loved ones that transitioned to the afterlife, superstitions were carefully followed, but most importantly instinctual feelings and thoughts were honored. Comas-Diaz (2008) validates these *gifts of power*,

Contrary to mainstream psychology, indigenous psychologies acknowledge spirituality as a form of knowledge, method, and development.

Indeed, one of the ways that Eurocentric psychology attempts to colonize women of color is through the degradation of their spiritual experiences. Within this framework, gifts of power constitute a resistance against oppression, colonization, and cultural imperialism. (p. 17)

My friendship with Carmen Lopez enriched my life, but also made me aware of a profound loss. When I first met Carmen's family and saw how different they were from my own, I thought my Mexican heritage had been lost through the generations. The academic term is acculturation, yet this word does not come close to the felt grief of the gradual loss of language and cultural traditions. While Carmen wanted to be more American, I wanted to be more *Mexicana*. Our friendship took us to the midpoint where we learned about being bicultural and shifting identities.

Both Carmen and I continue to live in the Borderlands of ethnic and gender identity. With our higher education and interests in ethnic and gender studies, we both can deconstruct our experiences of socialization, yet we still struggle with the discomfort of these new lenses. As mothers, we are now in the role of teaching our children re-visioned family values. We often have conversations about raising our children in bilingual homes, whether we will baptize our children, and whether we will continue the tradition of the *quinceañera* (coming-of-age ceremony) when our daughters turn 15. Each cultural tradition that used to be taken for granted is reflected on and their implications are weighed. Comas-Diaz (2008) refers to this as the *multicultural brain* and "...entails the capacity to simultaneously hold multiple beliefs, shift from one viewpoint to another, integrate several cultural perspectives, and create a new reality out of divergent positions" (p. 16).

Voice and language continue to be the heart of our life journey. While Carmen continues to interpret for her mother when they are together in public, her mother now speaks enough English to get by when Carmen is not available. Most importantly, Carmen now knows her voice and can express her emotions and not feel self-indulging for doing so. This transformation began in college when she went to the counseling center and met a therapist that changed her life. Vasquez (2008) could have been describing Carmen's experience when she wrote,

A Latina client who learned to withdraw into silence in the context of her family, because being outspoken was seen as a sign of disrespect and elicited punishment, may have a tendency to be hard on herself in the context of interactions which require verbal discussion, but which are intimidating. (p. 25)

This re-claiming of voice within a cultural context is not uncommon in my clinical work with Latinas. It isn't simply being more assertive about needs, but gaining a consciousness about the debilitating effects of *aguantando* (enduring) when it involves keeping silent and internalizing

pain. A reformulation of *aguantando* to include power and movement forward is *sobrepasando* (exceeding/transcending) and involves knowing when silence is a choice rather than a mandate.

Carmen and I both struggle with language in different ways. Spanish is my second language, whereas it is the dominant language for Carmen. We both work to maintain linguistic proficiency, but experiences of linguistic prejudice (Carreira, 2000) abound. Dialects can be used as indicators of social class and education (Corvalán, 1994, as cited in Carreira, 2000), and in our experiences speaking Spanish was another social identity. A painful, yet important training experience for me was during my first year of graduate school when I worked at a community agency. As I was speaking with a woman on the telephone in Spanish, she commented with laughter and derision in her voice, "*Hablas como un Mexicana* (You talk like a Mexican)." I was dumbfounded by her comment on many levels and numerous thoughts raced through my head in a flash. I was surprised that she suddenly shifted to the informal form of "you" in that one comment, I noted the disdain in her voice and wondered if she disliked Mexicans, I was embarrassed that perhaps my Spanish wasn't good enough (internalized oppression), and I was angry by her rudeness. The only response I could think of in the moment was "Thank you;" but that one experience taught me that being "a blank slate" with my clients was not possible. Speaking Spanish with my clients invariably turned to personal questions about where I grew up and how I learned Spanish. I honored their questions, but also used this as a point of conversation about being bilingual, shame around language use and disuse, and experiences of linguistic prejudice.

As Carmen and I enter our forties as married, professional women with children, we laughingly embrace the contradictions in our lives. We help each other approach challenges and fears head on, and no longer feel the need to run past them in silence. We have the language to name injustice and oppression in our lives, and have the tools to initiate change. We also accept that our spiritual connection with each other and the divine surpasses language, but the best way to describe us are as *hermanas de corazón y alma* (sisters of the heart and soul).

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